The Importance of the Periphery: How the ocean was perceived during late medieval Christianity in the Iberian southwest[1]

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ABSTRACT

The following article focuses on two fundamental questions about how the ocean was perceived in late medieval Christianity: how did Christians envisage the oceanic element at a time of historical crossroads? What weight did this "world view" have in (people's) daily contact with the ocean, especially along the southwestern coasts of Christianity? During the Middle Ages, two perceptions of the ocean prevailed in the Iberian territory. The first, inherited from the medieval *autorictas,* was in consonance with medieval Europe's more continental and rural view, and tended to eliminate the aquatic element from the horizon – or minimize it as much as possible. The second, more positive and optimistic, became especially predominant in the south of Christendom, and was therefore closer to the Classical and Muslim heritage. In the Iberian Peninsula, particularly in Portugal, the second view of the ocean prevailed after the transition from the Middle Ages to the Modern Era. However, it was still permeated by vestiges of the continental vision, more averse to the sea…

Keywords: Ocean perception; Middle Ages; Christianity; Iberian Southwest.

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The following pages focus on a central issue: the perception of the ocean in late medieval Christianity. Two fundamental questions arise around this subject: how did Christians in this period of transition perceive the oceanic element? How important was this "world view" in their daily contact with the ocean, especially in southwestern Europe, the first Christian region of the continent to venture out on the sea routes and initiate overseas expansion.

It should be noted that the following study is, above all, part of the history of mentalities. For that reason, the documentation that we consulted is especially encompassed in the framework of both old and coeval cultural production.

INDIVIDUALITY AND NECESSARY INTEGRATION IN THE INTERNATIONAL SCENARIO

In the last centuries of the Middle Ages, Portugal, like other nations, had a unique identity, resulting from its geographical, social and cultural situation. Its cultural heritage, especially in southern Portugal, had been shaped by a long period of contact with the Muslims. This influence was particularly evident in its relationship with the sea.

Portugal's geographical situation as a remote borderland at the western edge of Europe gave it a natural predisposition for oceanic expansion, the unknown extreme (Mattoso 1983).

However, it is fundamental to bear in mind that for the Iberians, the ocean was perceived as a vast incognito. The "known" world was essentially the Christian world, with its hierarchies, political, social and religious organizations, customs and superstitions, and judicial and liturgical practices - that is, everything that characterised western Christianity, especially an unequivocal religious identity and sense of belonging to a community of shared values. In the south of the country this premise was less defined, due to extended contact with the Muslims, but in the north, it applied almost absolutely.

As they were a part of Europe, the Iberian Christians were associated to countries like France, Italy, England, and even the Baltic nations in the centre of the continent. It is not surprising, therefore, that especially in the first medieval centuries, they all shared an identical conception of the world, particularly regarding their fears of the unknown in the oceanic element (Mattoso 2009).

Contact with the sea was not an exclusive appanage of Iberian Christians with Atlantic borders, even in terms of identities. Northern Europe was imbued with insularity, and a deep, constant and defining contact with the sea (primarily fishing). Then there was the undeniable force and vitality of the world of sea trade: in the North, the Normans, English and Hanseatic League; to the south, the Genovese, Venetians, Catalonians, and Majorcans, among others. In the 13th and 14th centuries all these regions had dynamic commercial networks, and engaged in intensive trade. And without forgetting the

historic contact of Western Europeans with other civilizations brought about by the Crusades, (diplomatic) embassies sent to the Orient, and expeditions of missionaries and merchants to the Orient.[3]

LEGACIES: CLASSICAL ANTIQUITY

To try and find the answers to the aforementioned questions we must delve into the often-remote origins of a complex phenomenon. It is as important to investigate "why" late medieval Christians developed their perception of the aquatic element as it is to examine the actual nature of this vision. Where did it originate? What traditions and cultural aspects (ancient and medieval) were the source of that feeling? ¨

Here it is important to point out the tenuousness of the massive classifications and stagnant periodisation, such as "medieval world" or "Renaissance". These temporal frameworks will be used merely to help the reader locate the events referred to, always bearing in mind that they are not periods, cultures, or societies perfectly demarcated in time (Le Goff 1994; Delumeau 2004).

In an initial Iberian phase, which soon reached other European nations[4], the Atlantic adventure of the discoveries during the transition of the Middle Ages to the Modern Age, had early precedents, namely in Classical Antiquity and first centuries of the Middle Ages. The claims of heroes like Hercules, Theseus and Ulysses, as well as the maritime odyssey of St. Vincent[5] and the sea voyages of St. Brendan[6] and St. Patrick[7], (two symbols of the Medieval Christian maritime tradition), are merely a few paradigmatic examples.

[3] Guilherme de Rubruck, Marco Polo, João de Montecorvino, Guilherme Adam, Ricoldo de Montecroce, Jordão de Severac, Odorico de Pordenone and João de Plano Carpini, among others (Roux 1985; Mollat 1990).

[4] The maritime expansion initiated by the Portuguese at the dawn of the 15th century, and followed soon after by the Spaniards was, actually, a European phenomenon. Although the Iberian countries were the first to initiate the process, we can't forget that they were part of what should be seen as a totality. We can affirm, for example, that Portugal was a pioneer, and for a while, the great protagonist of the voyages and contacts, but by no means can the global phenomenon of the discoveries be attributed exclusively to the Portuguese. Another aspect is that there were a variety of foreigners involved in the Portuguese projects, especially Italians, Catalans, Castilians and Muslims, mainly in the technical domain.

[5] Vincent of Saragossa (3rd century -c.304) was martyred in Valencia early in the 4th century. The many places of which he is patron saint include the Patriarchate of Lisbon, and some of his relics are in the see (of the Archdiocese of Lisbon).

[6] St. Brendan, the Navigator (c.484-c.577), or Brendan of Ardfert and Clonfert, was an Irish monk whose notoriety and cognomen derived from his maritime voyages. His biography, *Vita Sancti Brendani*, became one of the most translated and reproduced manuscripts of the High Middle Ages. Apart from the historical voyages, legend has it that St. Brendan embarked on a long journey in the Atlantic, which came to have great impact on the Medieval imaginary of the ocean and the insular world (*Navigatio Sancti Brendani*) (Nascimento 1998).

[7] Patrick of Ireland (387-461) was a Christian missionary, later elected bishop and patron saint of Ireland. His travels in the North Atlantic link him historically to ocean navigation.

To a large degree, the perception of the sea during the Middle Ages originated in the Greco-Roman world of Classical antiquity. This is evident in the manuscripts of the great medieval authors, as well as in the general coeval view of the world.

To cite just one example, in the *Etymologies* written by St. Isadore of Seville (c. 560-636), the most widely read text after the Bible in the West during the High Middle Ages, the influence of Pliny the Elder (23-79) is as clear as it is determinant (Mattoso 2009).

In Classical conceptions of the world, almost until the end of the Roman Empire, water had a central role, being a supply of resources essential for survival. The status of the Mediterranean illustrated this premise; geographers of antiquity believed that the sea was in the centre of a terrestrial frame – the complete inverse of the Medieval belief that the sea was surrounded the land. A true source of life, from which means of sustenance emerged – fish and salt – where men could travel and goods could circulate.

Graphic representations of marine scenes depicted colour and life. Something positive and almost reassuring. After all, it was by sea that the Greek heroes had travelled to new lands and lived their adventures (Mattoso 2009).

But a whole new dangerous and hostile conception arose from these voyages associated to the Straights of Gibraltar, also called (by the ancients) the "Pillars of Hercules". The Greek poet Pindar (c.518 a.C.-c.438 a.C.) wrote about the impossibility of navigating past the Columns of Hercules as it was inhabited by monstrous beasts (Céspedes del Castillo 1991). And in the early Renaissance, Dante Alighieri (1265-1321) (1998) immortalised in Canto XXVI of *Inferno* his vision of the Pillars of Hercules through the Ulysses' despondent voice.

This imagery is crucial to understand the basic dichotomy between the Mediterranean and the Atlantic which was at the core of the medieval world view in the early days of the discoveries (Akkari 2002).

Since Antiquity, the Atlantic had possessed an ambiguous character. There is the inscription in Greek of the maritime voyage of Jason and the Argonauts in their search for a golden sail. Also in that vast ocean were the "Fortunate Isles" mentioned by Hesiod (8th century B.C.) and Pindar, and the Elysian Fields which appear from Homer (9th century B.C.) onwards - paradises where the souls of a few chosen mortals would reside in afterlife. It was a symbolism that would re-emerge later in the medieval legends of navigator saints like Brendan. And then there was the archipelago of Plato's

"Atlantis" (c.427 a.C.-347 B.C.), probably the most controversial of all the paradises and utopias imagined by the Greeks in the western ocean.

Although more realistic and pragmatic, the Romans continued to render marvelous and fanciful descriptions of the ocean, such as Pliny the Elder's accounts of sea monsters in *Naturalis Historia*. In the *Collectanea rerum memorabilium* by Solino (3rd century B.C), and the treatise *De Situ Orbis* by Pomponius Mela (1st century), just to mention a few of the works by Roman authors that most influenced medieval imagery in of the ocean, the earth was surrounded by sea on all sides.

The first images of the sea in the region that would later be Portugal oscillated between fanciful, and fearful. But it was not an all-encompassing fear associated with the black dimension of an eschatological and apocalyptic place, prevalent in the late Middle Ages, but rather a more benign fear characteristic of the Classical Period. This can be appreciated, for example, in the cult of the "Sea Lares", guardian deities who protected seafarers from the dangers of sea travel.[8]

At the end of the first century (AD), Pliny the Elder noted how the Atlantic Ocean was a part of the quotidian of the coastal communities of Western Hispania, namely the region of Lisbon, where he identified several wonders that revealed a unique coexistence of maritime and terrestrial elements. One particular wonder consisted of an oceanic prodigy by which horses born in the region of Lisbon were endowed with extraordinary strength and speed. This boon resulted from the fact that the winds of fertility that impregnated the mares came from the Atlantic Ocean (Pliny 1958-1962; Krus 1998a). According to that Roman thinker, another marine wonder off the coast of Lisbon was the presence of monstrous beings like Triton and Nereid (Pliny 1958-1962).

Thus, Lisbon was seen as a space on the edge of the empire where myths circulated about the unstable and unpredictable character of the Atlantic Ocean. Even so, a benign notion of the maritime element prevailed, extendable to all the coastal regions of Roman Hispania, as evidenced by the ornate decoration filled with marine motifs in public and private Roman buildings.[9]

This positive idea of the ocean was reinforced when the Roman Empire adopted Christianism as its official religion. In the first chapter of the Genesis, the sea emerges as a blessed element: "God said: "Let the waters teem with living creatures (…). "And God saw that this was good. God blessed them, saying: Be fruitful and increase in number; and fill the waters of the sea" (Holy Bible 1992 p. 17-

[8] The cult of the "Lares Viales" was intended to invoke, and thank, their protection for land voyages. The "Lares" were guardian dieties of travelers (Krus 1983).
[9] An excellent example is the widely-used figure of the *hippocampu*s, an animal from Classical mythology with the head and upper body of a horse, and undulating tail of a fish (Krus 1998b).

18). In addition, Christ walked on the water, had fishermen as disciples, and was represented iconographically with a fish.

However, this frame of optimistic acceptance of the ocean ended with the demise of the Roman Empire of the West. Like other natural elements, it soon came to be perceived from the theological point of view, undergoing, through the voices of the great authorities, a transformation in meaning (Krus 1983). The maritime element became synonymous of destruction, chaos, disorder and danger, a situation greatly intensified by the raids on the Mediterranean and Atlantic coasts, first by Muslim marauders, and then by Scandinavians.

The vision from the Bible which now prevailed was negative, of an ocean that was averse to human beings. The episodes to remember now are mostly the deluge, the exodus and Jonas (that is, the sea as a storm, a space of falling, ruin, and doom, rather than salvation and redemption) (Mattoso 2009).

Another classical author, Rufius Festus Avienus (4th century A.D.), contributed with the poem *Ora Marítima* ("Sea Coasts")[10], to the negative medieval vision of the sea beyond the Pillars of Hercules. Avienus referred to an "abyss in the Ocean inhabited by monsters", and pointed out that "at that point the sea has no depth and the land is only covered by a shallow layer of water" (Avieno 1992 p.20). He added that "to the west of these Pillars (of Hercules), there is an endless abyss (…). No one has visited these places (…) because there are no winds upon the high sea to push them and no breath of air helps the vessels. Furthermore, (…) fog always envelops the abyss (…). This is the Ocean that roars around the vast Orb." (Avieno 1992 p.28).

In short, as the Western Roman Empire reached its end, what prevailed from authors like Pliny in the works of the authorities of the new period, like St. Augustine (354-430) and Isadore of Seville, was a nefarious vision of the aquatic element, especially of the ocean[11]. The Atlantic became known as the "Tenebrous Sea", and maritime perception during the High Middle Ages was based on a pessimistic sentiment. Clearly, this mental movement was associated to the political and social changes caused by the transition from a uniform, mercantile and largely maritime urban civilization, to a terrestrial/interior and deeply rural civilization.

[10] A poem that combines various sources and news or recollections of different trips. It is based on a journey in the 6th century B.C., with later additions by authors from different periods.

[11] Pliny establishes, for example, that the sea is a space with the most awful creatures, in the largest number of species and the most hybrid and monstrous (whales particularly, possessed a fantastic size, being characteristic of the Atlantic). In its depth animal life was not subject to order, but rather confusion and chaos (Pliny 1958-1962).

LEGACIES: THE MEDIEVAL CENTURIES

It is important to point out that, due to the longevity and extreme diversity of the so-called "Middle Ages", it is not possible to speak of conceptions valid for all cultural and social environments (Mattoso 2009; Martin 1996). Based on this premise, we believe that during the medieval centuries two concepts of the ocean existed, whereby the second one, especially (but not only) present in the Iberian southwest and in the European coastline of the Mediterranean basin, prevailed after the transition to the Modern Era.

THE NEGATIVISM TOWARDS THE OCEAN OF A PREDOMINANTLY RURAL CIVILIZATION

As stated previously, the first conception, inherited from the Classical world and legitimised by the medieval *autorictas,* was negative and conformed to the more continental and rural vision of Medieval Europe.

During the High Middle Ages, this concept prevailed particularly in the restricted religious and scholarly circles. However, given the influence that these social groups had on the rest of society, its impact became widespread. After all, the clergy were the spiritual guides of the people, a voice everyone listened to.

It was a coherent vision of the world and society, and tended to eliminate from the horizon, or reduce to its utmost, the aquatic element. In its essence, it identified Europe with Christianity, the Orient with mythic origins, and Africa with the enemies of the Church.

Widely divulged[12], this image became crucial to the development of the medieval Christian perception of the ocean insofar as it justified and enhanced the cohesion of a Christianity which was predominantly terrestrial, rural, and warlike. A Christianity where the majority of references to the ocean were sparse because it was, in general, a distant reality, seen with fear and trepidation.

According to the great medieval encyclopedist, Isadore, the ocean surrounded the terrestrial orb like a circle, representing a place of disparity, the direct opposite of life (Sevilha 1983). Therefore, it was up to men to only sail in inland seas like the Mediterranean which ensured safe, swift journeys. In the medieval world, the old *mare nostrum* was the perfect antithesis of the Atlantic Ocean, where the conditions for navigation were a far cry from those that seafarers were used to encountering in the Mediterranean (Parry 1981).

[12] As we pointed out above, the *Etymologies* of Isadore, for example, were a notable diffuser of ideas.

Unlike the Mediterranean, once ships left the coastline they could no longer use "familiar" reference points to check their routes (Ragosta 1981). Here mariners faced an almost totally unknown ocean, with no knowledge of its limits. Thus, what differentiated the Atlantic from the Mediterranean was the dichotomy of familiar sea/closed versus unknown sea/open (Fonseca 1993).

Following this line of thought, we feel that we can rightfully affirm that at the time of Portugal's founding in the 12th century, the political and intellectual elites of the young kingdom envisaged the oceanic space in a similar way as the rest of continental Christianity did: land, war, and rurality were the pillars of its existence.

Coeval ecclesiastical production show that the upper echelons of Portuguese society adhered to this more pessimistic concept of the maritime element. In the second half of the 12th century (c. 1168), shortly after Afonso Henriques was proclaimed king of Portugal (1143), the canons of the monastery of Santa Cruz in Coimbra – the most important monastic (and cultural) centre in Portugal of that time[13] - produced a biography of St. Teotónio, their first prior and counsellor to the king. In the manuscript, the authors refer to the «dangers and fears of the sea as a form of exalting the heroic sanctity of their spiritual father (…) That is, (…) the sea and its monstrous beings symbolised as dreadful threats, those that only a saint could neutralize and exorcise. » (Krus 1998b p.95)

The prevailing sentiment was, therefore, that the ocean was synonymous to chaos, fear, and suffering, never auguring anything good or positive. It was by definition the anti-world, a status justified by the monstrous beings that lived in it, and by the longstanding idea of the Saracens who had travelled the routes towards the Iberian Peninsula in previous centuries. It was necessary to record the *mirabilia* that took place therein.[14].

This image divulged by the learned elites, characterized by suspicion and torment, somehow mingled with that of the common man, even though the later had a much more limited understanding. In both cases, the unfathomable and endless ocean was seen as a space where it was impossible to remain for any length of time, since the dangers and horrible occurrences increased in dimension and frequency the farther away one got from the coast.

The oceanic element was, therefore, the space par excellence of the unknown, the unearthly, chaos, evil forces, the uninhabitable - in short, everything that represented the opposite of the life and cosmic security of the Christian faith. It is not, therefore, a coincidence that Isadore ascribes the origin

[13] It was later replaced in importance by Santa Maria of Alcobaça, founded by the same king.
[14] Regarding the concept of *mirabilia* we follow the definition proposed by Jacques Le Goff (1994).

of the four winds to the confines of the ocean (Seville 1983). Oceanic disturbances, such as storms, were pure manifestations of evil.

This uneasy vision was reinforced by another influential authority of the early Middle Ages, the Anglo-Saxon monk Beda the Venerable (c. 672-735). His analogy of the egg yolk surrounded by the egg white to demonstrate the theory that the earth was at the centre of the world and surrounded by water on all sides, was very popular. This would be, in the end, the geographical disposition in the famous T-O medieval world maps (Fonseca 1993).

The German philosopher Albert of Saxony (c.1316-1390) was also an author of reference regarding this idea of the sea. The fact that he was from a much later period than Isadore, but still maintained this view of the ocean can be considered a reflection of its perpetuity. Particularly if we take into account that he was the rector of the universities of Paris and Vienna. For Albert of Saxony, the ocean emerged as something impassable because it was beyond the world, outside of the livable space. No one should navigate in it.

Other relevant authors whose voices projected the ocean as a hazardous and hostile place to be deeply feared, were Honorius Augustodunensis (1080-1154), with his work *Imago Mundi*; Bartholomeus Anglicus (c.1203-1272) and *De Proprietatibus Rerum*; Brunetto Latini (c. 1220-1295) and *Li Livres dou Tresor*; Vicente Beuvais (c.1190-c.1264) with his *Speculum*; and later, Pierre d'Ailly (1350-1420) with *De Imago Mundi.*

This was a mental picture oriented by a centre-periphery logic: the marine nature is proportionately more unstable and dangerous the farther away it is from the habited world, the terrestrial orb (which in old geographical terms signified the Roman Empire). The dualities order/chaos, security/danger, tranquility/despair now took on full meaning.

The hostile concept of the ocean clearly prevailed in the continental regions of the West, far from the areas where fishing and maritime trade took place, which in many cases were also devoid of the civilizational influence of Rome. Here the legacy of Mediterranean civilizations – Greek, Latin, and later Muslim – was essentially literary, circulating only through ecclesiastical channels. The greater part of society knew no other view of the sea.

On the Path to an Optimistic Vision of the Oceanic Element

With the return to an urban world[15], the second concept of the ocean that we can consider to have prevailed during the medieval period – particularly in the High Middle Ages – tended to be both urban and mercantile, and consisted of a more positive and optimistic look of the maritime element.

Despite having spread throughout all the coastal areas of Christianity – see the cases of France, England and the Low Countries (Tangheroni 1996) - this second concept was precocious and particularly intense in both the Iberian southwest, and in the Italian Peninsula. The reason was that these regions were closer to the Classical and Muslim legacy, and had played an important role in the general movement of repossession from Muslim control of coastal and maritime areas, both along the Mediterranean and the Atlantic. In the case of the Portuguese, pioneers of the European maritime movement during the transition to the Modern Age, "recent" contact with the Muslim civilization and the influence of Mozarab traditions left deep marks in the way the relationship with the maritime environment was perceived. In the Italian case, the phenomenon of urban recovery was truly exponential, as exemplified by Genova, Naples and Venice (Lane 1973).

This vision would be a determining factor in the development of the mentality of Iberian navigators of the 15th and 16th centuries, greatly helping to mitigate their fear of the ocean. A volatile emotion, impossible to define thoroughly because it belonged to the domain of dreams and imaginary, fear continued to structure the way the seafarer faced the unknown and interacted with it. However, being accompanied by a new and powerful array of spiritual solutions, such as seafarers' pieties, it was very much transformed.

The Portuguese mariner, for example, was among the most experienced in all of Europe. He not only possessed advanced navigational techniques, vessels, and nautical instruments which were perfected with each journey, but his knowledge of sea routes, currents and winds was rapidly increasing as well. The *Tratado da Agulha de Marear* (Treatise on the Needle Compass) (1514) by João de Lisboa and the *Livro de Marinharia* (Book of Seamanship) (c.1566) by Pero Vaz Fragoso illustrate the state of advancement in (Portuguese) maritime know-how. However, in the end, old fears resurfaced; it was still too early to truly break loose from the moors of a concept that had taken centuries to take root, no matter how palpable new experiences were.[16] What was different was that in this period of transition,

[15] One of the structural modifications introduced slowly by the so-called *Renaissance* of the 12th century was the explosion of urban importance. In fact, in this reforming century, cities, with their growing economic and social dynamism, broke with the rigid patterns of a predominantly rural society (Le Goff 1995).

[16] As Jean Delumeau points out (2001), fear is always present in the relationship with the aquatic element, particularly the ocean.

fears and anxieties about the sea were increasingly filtered and transfigured by a whole "new" way of perceiving the oceanic space.

This phenomenon, intrinsic to the mental framework, was largely due to the Christianisation process of the maritime element. Gradually a new ecclesiastical position emerged: the clergy now used doctrine to justify the allure that the sea was beginning to have throughout the Christian world. (The clerics) started to provide a framework for, and supported the sea voyages and maritime trade routes, neutralizing, as much as possible, the eschatological danger of the sea (Krus 1998b).

The new ecclesiastical posture mainly involved promoting and legitimizing a series of patron saints (such as St. Cristopher, the patron of travelers), and respective Christian-based cults, to revoke as much as possible the negative and malign elements of the aquatic environment. We refer to the ex-votos of all the propitiatory rituals on board, and on land, to protect seafarers, and spiritually dominate the sea.

The Aviz dynasty, who were the driving force behind the Portuguese discoveries, especially venerated St. Vincent. According to the chronicler Gomes Eanes de Zurara (1410 – 1474), on the voyage to conquer Ceuta in 1415, the king ordered all sails to be dropped when rounding the cape of São Vicente as a sign of respect to the saint, and as a way of invoking his protection (Zurara 1915).

In the case of southwestern Iberia, there was a return to old conceptions – Greek and Roman, and the more recent Muslim and Mozarab ones[17] –, closely linked with the urban world, trade, and the quotidian activities of coastal communities that depended on the sea to survive and thrive[18]. However, after the Reconquest of Andalusia by the Christians from the north, who came from a less urban and considerably more earthbound society, the fear-free relationship with the ocean suffered a blow. This was aggravated by the fact that the Atlantic routes continued to be used by the Moroccan Muslims to periodically assail Christian Iberia, keeping alive the flame of memories of dreaded raids that came from the sea.

However, the legacy of positivity and openness towards the sea on the part of the coastal populations in the centre and south of Portugal maintained a degree of solidity, enough to help a more open and positive concept to emerge and predominate during the next centuries. Also, early on, the

[17] The Mozarabs were Christians who lived under the rule of Muslim Al-Andalus. Although they did not convert to Islam, they adopted many elements of the Arab culture and language.

[18] For the coastal communities, the ocean always had a less negative connotation since they had constant contact with it, and it was where their sustenance came from, either from fishing, salt extraction or trade. It would have been easier for peasants-fishermen from the villages and towns along the Atlantic coast, especially in the south, to experience this change, both intellectually and in terms of daily navigation. On the other hand, Portugal, and the Iberian Peninsula in general, had numerous sea ports, a reality well integrated in their social quotidian.

new lords of the north became well-aware of the wealth that the Muslims had been obtaining from the ocean, namely in privileged cities like Lisbon, with its long history of prosperity derived from close proximity to the Atlantic.

We could, then, speak of a return, or re-establishment, but this phenomenon was actually more than that; Portuguese society was experiencing historical changes which were driving it to expand into the maritime element, namely a new, increasingly centralized and centralizing royal power, which saw the ocean, cities (especially coastal ones), and commerce as ideal spaces for its governing action and for the flourishing of the kingdom [19].

Several other factors explain Portugal's acceptance of the second concept: the determination of King Dinis (r.1279-1325) to build a powerful naval fleet for Portugal, which led to the recruitment of the Genovese Emanuele Pessagno (c.1285-?), or *Micer* Manuel Pessanha, as he became known in Portugal, as Chief Admiral of the Kingdom of Portugal[20]; the expansion of Portuguese trade in the North Atlantic (Marques 1992; Haenens 1984); the dispatch of embassies (to other countries?); a shortage of natural resources in the homeland; the Crusading spirit; defensive measures against Muslim pirates, and the actual practice of piracy; the cult of St. Vincent, patron of Lisbon, by navigators and fishermen after the 12th century (Nascimento & Gomes 1988); the influence of Arab expertise in both the construction of Portuguese ships, and seamanship; as José Mattoso (1993 p.272) points out, the «abundant Arab roots of the terminology of Portuguese maritime life», evidence of the strong influence left by the Arabs in the Portuguese rapport with the ocean; the legitimation of a new dynasty of kings which came to the throne by an unconventional succession process, hitherto unheard of in the rest of Christianity[21].

Several manuscripts attest to the fact that the inhabitants of southwestern Iberia possessed a positive attitude towards the ocean. These include the *Cantigas de Amigo,* which show how love, pleasure and happiness of the body can also come from the sea, as seen by the words of the minstrels Mendinho, and especially Martim Codax, in their poems «Ondas do mar de Vigo» (Waves of the sea of

[19] The Aviz dynasty was the second one to rule in Portugal (1385-1580). John I of Portugal (r.1385-1433), known as Master of Aviz, and with the epithet "of Happy Memory", was the first king of the House of Aviz.
[20] King Dinis hired this experienced Genovese seaman to reorganize the still incipient Portuguese armada, and direct naval construction and all Portuguese navigation, both in peace and wartime. The king granted him the title of *Almirante-Mor* of the Kingdom of Portugal in a letter dated 1 February, 1317. Manuel Pessanha exerted considerable influence in the development of the Portuguese navy, and went on to serve during the reign of king Afonso IV of Portugal (r.1325-1357).
[21] King John I, first monarch of the Aviz dynasty, was the illegitimate son of king Peter I of Portugal (r.1357-1367).

Vigo) and «Ai ondas que eu vim veer» (Oh waves that I have come to see) (Lopes 2016 p.79, 82 e 161)[22].

Another good example where the positive relationship of the Iberian Peninsula with the sea is made evident can be found in a passage describing Spain in the *Crónica Geral de Espanha de 1344,* by Count Pedro de Barcelos (1287-1354)[23]. Always present, the maritime element is a bountiful source of fish, salt, and trade. By pointing out the existence of seaports, this work evokes the presence and circulation of many ships (Cintra 2009 p.39-42).

Also noteworthy are a set of narratives that reveal a benevolent relation between this region of southern Europe and the ocean, namely the episode with the eight adventurers of Lisbon[24], of the Muslim geographer, cartographer and voyager Idrissi (1110-c.1166)[25]; the hagiography of St. Amaro, probably of Southern origin[26], clearly showing the close connection between voyage-ocean-islands-wonders; the hagiographic account of the journey of Trezenzonio to the island of Solsticionis, probably of Mozarab influence[27].

All these accounts show signs of a spirit that was actually more optimistic than bold towards the oceanic element. A spirit which tended to be open and positive, founded on a millenary tradition of daily habits associated to the sea – the biggest example of which was navigation -, which had never disappeared entirely from the mental frame of men from southwestern Iberia, and to whom the Portuguese navigators of the 15th and 16th centuries were greatly indebted

The same can be said of northern Europeans, who had always had close ties with the ocean. Let us present an emblematic example. Shortly before his death in 1072, Bishop Leofric of Exeter donated a large volume of Old English poetry to the library of his cathedral, in which a clear picture of the Anglo-Saxon view of the sea was presented. One poem in particular, *The Seafarer*, celebrates this relationship with the ocean and extols the experience of navigating despite its inherent risks and

[22] The poems of the *Cantigas* that don't have titles are usually cited by their first verse.
[23] Pedro Afonso of Portugal, third Count of Barcelos.
[24] Traditionally entitled "Viagem dos aventureiros de Lisboa" (Voyage of the adventurers of Lisbon), this episode narrates the adventures of eight travelers from Muslim Lisbon who navigated for a month in the Atlantic Ocean in a southern direction. During their travels they came upon two islands, one deserted and the other inhabited. Their aim was to learn about the limits of the sea and the wonders therein.
[25] At the service of king Roger II of Sicily (r.1130 – 1154), Idrisi conceived a large world map (1154) known as *Tabula Rogeriana*, accompanied by a book called *Geografia* (designated as Kitab al-Rujari or *Book of Roger*), of which the above-mentioned episode is a part.
[26]This seafaring saint was responsible for a whole geography of voyages, from the Black Sea to the Mediterranean, and from there to the North Atlantic. He was a hagiographic figure who overcame his fear of the ocean and became a pioneer of the "Christian colonization of the ocean" (Krus 1998b p.102).
[27] *Trezenzonii, De Solistitionis Insula Magna*, title translated as *Viagem de Trezenzónio ao Paraíso, na Ilha do Solstício* (Díaz & Díaz 1993 p.638-639).

dangers. In the opening section the seafarer appears tormented by anxiety, but the feeling soon inverts into a desire to venture out into the waters, revealing a spirit of adventure and a desire to discover the world. We are therefore, faced with a positive witness who is open to the aquatic element, in stark contrast to the traditional continental vision:

> «Dreadful tossing of the waves, where the anxious night-watch
> Often held me at the prow of the boat
> When it crashes beside the cliffs. Afflicted by cold
> Were my feet frost-bound by cold fetters.
>
> The world quickens:
> All of this urges those eager of spirit
> The spirit to the journey, to him who is so inclined
> To venture far out on the paths of the sea.
>
> Along with the sea-flood,
> Travels widely over the whale's haunt,
> Over the world's expanse; it comes again to me
> Eager and greedy; the solitary flier yells,
> Incites the spirit irresistibly on the whale's path
> Over the sea's expanse. » (quoted in Rose 2007 p.01)

It was a spirit that, in the southern Europe of the late Middle Ages, was strengthened by the proliferation of a pleiad of propitiatory religious rituals and beliefs, which in practice legitimised that optimistic concept of the ocean.

Thus, more or less harmoniously, the old continental vision blended with the perception now prevalent in the littoral. The clergy's endorsement was decisive in bringing the impetuous and erratic ocean to the security of Christian spirituality. It was the Christianisation of the ocean. Thus, regional navigation was validated, but more importantly, so was long distance navigation. What Isadore considered to be prohibited, therefore, literally meant death and damnation of the soul.[28]

One of the areas where this structural change was most apparent was in cartography, with the definitive rejection of the vision of the ocean as a great peripheral sea that supposedly surrounded a land mass formed by the three known continents, Europe, Asia and Africa. Gradually, both the circular T/O maps and the symbolic paradigm were abandoned, making way for an increasingly more objective vision of reality. For example, despite early inaccuracies, portolan charts began to offer more and more detailed information of coastlines and the urban world.

[28] It is important not to forget that from Homer and Virgil to Camões, the vast majority of texts suggest that the worst kind of death was to be swallowed by the waves. To die at sea meant that one would not benefit from burial in a sacred place, that is, on Christian soil. The absence of a tomb eliminated any hope of having a resting place where the soul could wait for resurrection. Therefore, the soul of someone who perished at sea would not have the same destiny (in afterlife) as a Christian who was buried on firm land. Even Shakespeare, through the voice of Gonzalo, expressed a desperate yearning for a "dry death" (Shakespeare 1992 p.06; Koiso 2004).

Travel literature also contributed significantly to this attitude towards the sea. After 1200 and the return to an urban and mercantile model, this type of narrative gained popularity in Europe among the different social groups[29]. These reports, real or imaginary, were evidence of an increasing curiosity about the unknown, and contributed significantly to invert a mental order in which the ocean was mostly far-removed.

The formerly inaccessible sea was now a navigable space, and consequently, a means to reach any destination. It brought to mind the fulfillment of Seneca's prophecy (4 BC – 65 AD) in *Medeia* (Séneca 1973 p.123): «There will be centuries in which the Ocean will open it barriers and new lands will appear; Tetis will discover new orbs.»

The shift towards open-mindedness was both a cause, and a consequence of deep civilizational transformation, whereby an insular and rural Europe turned into an urban and inquisitive Europe, oriented to the exterior and willing to initiate contact with "Others" living beyond the frontiers of Christianity.[30]

THE INSULAR WORLD AND THE BRIDGE BETWEEN TWO VISIONS OF THE OCEANIC ELEMENT

The exceptional character of the ocean was reflected in the vision of an insular world, and the beings that dwelled there. Medieval geographers depicted islands inhabited by strange creatures whose monster-like nature resulted from living in remote islands, beyond the frontiers of the terrestrial orb.

But these islands also allowed for the "Christianisation" of the ocean. Here it is important to mention the influence of "Celtic Christianity". The accounts of voyages of religious men like Brendan and Patrick, whose maritime feats were a direct inheritance from Arthurian traditions and Old Norse sagas, gave the sea a new sacred importance, fundamental for its process of consecration. During their insular stopovers, the great figures of Christendom searched for and found, temples, relics, and especially the Garden of Eden, thus becoming a model to be emulated. In the narrations of these holy adventures, basic elements of medieval European imagery were transformed and adapted to a new reality, and to new objectives.

[29]Taken as a whole, the so-called medieval travel books constitute a multifaceted genre. They are works of very different character, and aims. However, despite their many differences, there is an articulation of two common factors in the construction of the discourse – documentary and literary – giving them their uniqueness. The first, dominant factor, gives the descriptions, particularly of the urban world, a crucial importance, overriding the narrative, or literary aspects. Similarly, by resorting to a common set of narrative procedures, though lacking a set pattern, the texts that comprise this diverse genre have an autonomous literary form in the field of medieval prose (Eugenia Popeanga 1991; Pérez Priego 1984; Carrizo Rueda 1996).

[30]It was an ontological mutation which upset the foundations of the mental frame, and consequently, the structures of the imagination. That mutation that Braudel speaks of when evoking long term history (Braudel 1990).

The same occurred with the desert, where its mysterious properties were conferred to the ocean, and with the forest, whose magical and dreamlike qualities emerged seductively in Atlantic islands (Le Goff 1994 p.83-99).

The ocean now became a network of roads to be travelled by the faithful in search of miracles and divine graces. One example was the creation of a utopia on the eighth Canary island, whose origins came from the *Navigatio Sancti Brandani*

The insular universe of the Atlantic progressively offered the medieval man a differentiated contact with the ocean. More positive, because it was strongly associated to the Christianisation of the space – that is, ordering and guaranteeing cosmic security. Therefore, islands assume a unique operability in the late medieval mentality: they function as a bridge between the two medieval views of the oceanic space. As an enclave in the middle of dangerous ocean waters, an island, when chosen and blessed, that is, sacred, ensures the Christianisation of the surrounding ocean and the routes that lead to it (Juan Gil 2001).

As special places in the imagination of Europeans since Antiquity[31], islands were always spaces for the creation of utopias, and therefore a way to reach Eternity, to attain the unknown.

The weight of this element of wonder in the imaginary was such that several expeditions were carried out to find the eighth Canary island. Even after the truth about the archipelago became known, it continued to maintain its image as a mythical place in official records. Furthermore, on 10 November, 1475, king Afonso V of Portugal (r. 1438-1481) granted the lost islands to Fernão Teles (1431-1477) (Nascimento 1998).

By the 15th century, the Atlantic had taken on the oneiric connotation previously belonging to the Indian Ocean (Le Goff 1993), and with it the reputation of being the depository par excellence of the marvels of the world.

Another aspect was that islands were a valuable instrument to make the Atlantic a "horizontal" ocean like the Mediterranean, and consequently, navigable. Populating the immense Atlantic with islands, imagined or real, proved to be decisive for the medieval imagination, especially considering safety during the "returns". From the 12th century onwards, cartography revealed this objective, especially when we remember the special transposition of different islands that accompanied

[31] In the poem *The Works and the Days,* Hesiod associates the Guilded Age to the Fortunate Islands; Pindar, in the second *Olympic,* situates the happiness of the just in the Fortunate Islands; Homer, in the *Odyssey*, refers to the enchanting nature of the island of the Phaeacians; Horace, in the *Epods*, describes the Fortunate Islands as rising from the ocean, privileged places where everything is perfect and temperate (Delumeau 1994).

the evolution of empirical knowledge of the ocean. Islands allowed for provisioning, and at the same time assumed the role of "landmarks" which existed in the Mediterranean but not in the middle of the Atlantic.

BY WAY OF CONCLUSION

All spaces generate myths, and any appropriation of space involves a fanciful, irrational aspect (Zumthor 1994). This premise is even more valid when referring to a scenario like the Atlantic Ocean during the long the period of the Middle Ages, a space beyond the full dominion of man, where at least until the 15th century a symbolic image and mythological importance prevailed - a legacy from both Antiquity, and the "weight" of the medieval *mirabilia,* deeply steeped in Christian traditions and principles.

With this picture as a backdrop, it is possible to identify the predominance of two concepts of the ocean in medieval Europe: the first, negative, associated to a more continental and rural vision of Christianity; the second, more benevolent and optimistic, largely inherited from the Classical world, and Muslim civilisation.

In the centuries of transition from the Middle Ages to the Modern period, the second concept would prevail, particularly in the southwest of Christianity, through a process that took place especially in people's mentalities. It had two main aspects: on one side, there was an effort to Christianise the ocean through different spiritual devices, like invoking and worshipping patron saints (it is fundamental to bear in mind that this mutation is marked by permeability, that is, elements of the first concept persist in the second one, whereby it is not possible to talk of stagnant visions of the ocean [32]); on the other side, the recovery of the urban and mercantile paradigm in all of Europe, particularly evident in the Iberian territory and the Mediterranean coastal areas of Europe, that is, the south of Christianity.

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[32] Of which mermaids, marine monsters, and the notion of an "abyss" beyond Cape Bojador were examples (Zurara 1998 chap. VIII; Pereira 1988). This phenomenon occurred exclusively in later periods, such as the 17th and 18th centuries.

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A Centralidade da Periferia: a percepção do oceano na Cristandade tardo-medieval do sudoeste ibérico

RESUMO

Reflectindo sobre a representação do oceano na Cristandade tardo-medieval, o presente artigo debruça-se sobre duas interrogações fundamentais: de que modo o cristão deste período de encruzilhada concebia o elemento oceânico? Qual o peso desta "mundividência" no contacto directo e quotidiano com o oceano, sobretudo no litoral sudoeste da Cristandade? Durante os séculos medievos prevaleceram no território ibérico (e também na orla mediterrânica da Europa) duas concepções do oceano. A primeira, herdada das *autorictas* medievais e em conformidade com a visão mais continental e rural da Europa medieval, tendia a eliminar do horizonte - ou a reduzir ao máximo - o elemento aquático. A segunda, mais positiva e optimista, tornou-se preponderante sobretudo no sul da Cristandade, estando por isso mais próxima da herança clássica e muçulmana. Na Península Ibérica, e mais particularmente em Portugal, chegados os séculos de viragem da Idade Média para a era Moderna, prevaleceu a segunda concepção. No entanto, sempre penetrada por vestígios da visão continental e mais adversa ao mar…

Palavras Chave: Representação do oceano; Idade Média; Cristandade; Sudoeste Ibérico.

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